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THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF CUREL'S *L'AME EN FOLIE*

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES
1938

By
WILLIAM M. SCHUYLER

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THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF CUREL'S *L'AME EN FOLIE*

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THE manuscripts of *L'Ame en folie*,[1] which may be considered in many respects as François de Curel's masterpiece, contain, besides the final version, a number of incompleted *brouillons*. These sketches may be pieced together to form a fairly clear picture of the play's evolution, and they also cast some light on Curel's original intentions in writing the play. It is possible, furthermore, to learn something of the origins of this drama from the preface or *historique*. Curel tells us that he began the composition of *L'Ame en folie* in 1914. At this moment he had only just emerged from a silence of eight years, due perhaps to disappointment at the failure of *Le Coup d'aile* in 1906.[2] When the Comédie-française first decided upon a revival of *La nouvelle idole* (which eventually took place June 26, 1914), Curel, desiring to produce a new play before this revival, had agreed to a production of *La Danse devant le miroir*, which had its *première* at the Nouvel-Ambigu on January 17 of the same year. Although *La Danse* cannot precisely be said to be a new play, since it is only a completely re-written version of a former failure, *L'Amour brode*, its composition, which took place during June and July, 1913,[3] no doubt reawakened the author's interest in the theater, and led him to contemplate an entirely new work.

Curel began *L'Ame en folie* at a period when he was accustomed to spending six months of each year on his estates in Lorraine. Having always been very fond of hunting, he would devote many hours of the day to this sport or to observation of the animals which inhabited his domain. Attracted by Darwinism and the theory of natural selection, he realized that his own observations confirmed this theory,[4] and he

[1] All Curel's manuscripts are to be found at the Bibliothèque nationale: *Nouvelles acquisitions françaises*, Nos. 23314–23325 (Don No. 6037). Those of *L'Ame en folie* are contained in Vol. VIII (No. 23321). Pp. 409.

[2] This motive for his retirement is vigorously denied by Curel (*Théâtre complet* [Paris: Crès, 1922], V, 167), but it seems, on account of what we know of his temperament, very probable.

[3] Curel MSS, Vol. V, fol. 32v.

[4] *Théâtre complet*, V, 201–3.

considered expressing his ideas on the subject in a book. This book was to be entitled "Le Pont des soupirs," but it was never completed, for Curel suddenly decided that his plan was too ambitious, that his observations were not suitable for a really scholarly work. Nevertheless, not wishing to abandon entirely all the ideas upon which he had meditated for so long, he thought of developing them in a play. But even a *pièce d'idées* could not do full justice to these meditations, which fortunately are preserved in the fine *historique* of *L'Ame en folie*.

It was on May 4, 1914, at Ketzing, that Curel made some preliminary notes for this play:

> Sujet: Chez une sotte, une idiote mal développée à tous les points de vue, mal servie par les circonstances, etc., etc., éveil progressif de tous les sentiments, découverte de ce qui peut donner de l'attrait à la vie, parce qu'à côté d'elle deux êtres vivent, souffrent, aiment, et parlent de choses grandes, intéressantes et ... —Il faut que ce soit bien *l'Histoire d'une idiote qui n'eut dans sa vie qu'une jouissance et ... ce fut une jouissance de l'esprit.*[5]

A short scenario of the first and third acts of this play, which was to be called "Le Tombeau vide," follows, as well as a few jottings on the characters. Curel appears to have worked on "Le Tombeau vide" through the month of July, 1914, keeping closely to the original subject sketched in his first notes.

The "idiote" is Blanche Riolle,[6] a rather simple-minded woman, who suddenly becomes involved in a miniature drama. Living away from the world in an isolated country village, she seldom hears from her niece, the celebrated actress, Rosa Romance.[7] The unexpected appearance of Rosa places Blanche and her husband, Justin, in an embarrassing position. The actress has been the mistress of Michel de Richeval, a young diplomat who has not hesitated to betray her with a foreign princess in order to conclude an important treaty. Rosa is furious and has made up her mind to end her liaison with Michel. But the young man pursues her to the country and forces her to confess that she too has often sold herself in order to obtain a coveted role. Justin and Blanche witness the reconciliation of the young people, which amuses the cynical Justin. He has spent much time in observing wild

[5] Curel MSS, Vol. VIII, fol. 3r.

[6] In the earliest notes she is called Blanche Dromard, but the name is soon changed to its final form. The name Dromard, slightly altered to Dromarre, is then given to the doctor, designated at first simply as "le médecin."

[7] Rosa bears the name Clara de Romance throughout several outlines of the play.

animals and has realized that men have many points in common with beasts. He has even written a book on the subject. He says:

J'ai intitulé le mien: *L'âme en folie*.[8] Ce titre signifie que l'amour n'est autre chose que l'invasion dans l'âme humaine du rut animal, avec une floraison merveilleuse de sentiments et d'images qui finissent par occuper une telle place que l'emportement des sens, origine de tout, ne paraît plus qu'accidentel.

Rosa is thoroughly in agreement with her uncle: "Ce qui ramène aux animaux vient des animaux," she remarks. "Mais que viennent faire les animaux dans votre réconciliation?" says poor Blanche, who is completely at a loss to understand her husband's pronouncements. "Ce qu'on serait surpris de voir faire aux anges ..." answers her niece.[9]

Meanwhile Blanche herself has been greatly attracted by the handsome Michel, and she shamefacedly admits these sensations to her husband. But Justin is not in the least annoyed: the incident is nothing but a fascinating illustration of his theory that man possesses something which is completely lacking in an animal: a soul. It is the soul which compels Blanche to admit her sinful passion instead of pursuing Michel like a primitive savage. Blanche does not completely understand all this, but at last she feels a desire to understand. Left alone in the studio of her father, who had been a painter, she suffers a long-threatened heart attack, and during her last moments of delirium she fancies that she hears a conversation between the skeleton (which had always frightened her) and the mannequin, both of them her father's old models. The mannequin no longer can tell whether it represents Lucretia or Messalina (just as Blanche cannot distinguish clearly between the two sides of her nature); and the skeleton announces that, constructed as he is from the bones of many men, he still resembles a living human being of complex heredity. He proposes this inscription for Blanche's tomb: "Ci-gît une idiote qui n'eut dans sa vie qu'une jouissance, et ce fut une jouissance de l'esprit."[10] Rosa and Michel enter and find Blanche dead.

Curel, not entirely satisfied with "Le Tombeau vide,"[11] neverthe-

[8] This is the first appearance of this title in the manuscripts (Vol. VIII, fol. 40v).

[9] *Ibid.*, fol. 46v. None of these speeches appears in the final version of the play.

[10] *Ibid.*, fols. 54v–55r.

[11] The significance of this title is apparent in a fragment of dialogue between Blanche and the curé. Blanche, superstitiously terrified of the skeleton, wishes to have it buried in the cemetery, but the priest objects. "Réfléchissez donc, Madame," he says, "que puisqu'il n'a rien été, le tombeau où on le mettrait serait un tombeau vide" (*ibid.*, fol. 50r; cf.

less took the manuscript with him when he left Lorraine at the beginning of the World War. From October 25, 1914, to January 16, 1915, at Zurich, he made corrections in this manuscript, which he read to Lucien Descaves and to the actor Féraudy.[12] Féraudy's opinion must have led Curel to make further modifications in the play, for the following note is found among the manuscripts:

Lecture à Féraudy le 4 février soir. Le lendemain matin repris la pièce pour sortir d'une confusion qui règne sur le véritable sujet: on n'en a conscience qu'à la fin du 3e acte. Nécessité de montrer tout le temps que l'éducation de Blanche, en un jour, qui est son dernier, constitue le sujet de la pièce.[13]

During the month of October, 1915, Curel worked on "Le Tombeau vide," as well as on *La Comédie du génie*, and finally substituted the very appropriate title of *L'Ame en folie* for the original name of the former play. He continued to revise the work even after his return to Lorraine at the end of the war, and the final version was completed in 1919.[14]

The numerous changes made in *L'Ame en folie* were entirely characteristic of Curel, who was always fond of re-working his various plays. Indeed, it may be said that he spent more time at this task than is justified by the success of his revisions. He was led to make these changes by different considerations: comments of the critics after the first performance;[15] a desire to improve the play from a technical or stylistic point of view; and, finally, an impulse to freshen an old play by the addition of new ideas which happened to interest him at the moment. Ordinarily these changes may be traced from the first manuscripts through the various editions of the work. *L'Ame en folie*, however, presents a slightly different case. Curel worked on it over a period of years and did not publish it until he had attained a thorough-

Théâtre complet, V, 357). He is soon persuaded to change his mind by Justin, who uses the argument later set forth by the skeleton itself to show that it is as much an individual as a man of varied heredity. It is interesting to note that Curel preserved the title of "Le Tombeau vide" by using it in his autobiographical play, *La Comédie du génie*, where it is mentioned as one of the masterpieces of the hero, a playwright (*Théâtre complet*, VI, 56).

[12] MSS, Vol. VIII, fol. 56r; see also *Théâtre complet*, V, 228.

[13] MSS, Vol. VIII, fol. 120r.

[14] Before appearing in the definitive edition (*Théâtre complet*, Vol. V), *L'Ame en folie* was published in the *Revue de Paris*, January 15, February 1 and 15, 1920 (I, 225–63, 449–92, 673–97); in the *Petite illustration théâtrale*, February 21, 1920; and in an edition by Crès (1920). These three editions, however, differ from that of the *Théâtre complet* (1922) only in some unimportant stylistic details and in the absence of the *historique*, which appeared for the first time in the *Revue de Paris*, February 15 and March 1, 1922 (I, 673–96; II, 5–28).

[15] Changes in *L'Envers d'une sainte* may be traced directly to Jules Lemaître, in *Les Fossiles* to Francisque Sarcey, and in *La nouvelle idole* to Jacques du Tillet, to cite some obvious examples.

ly satisfactory version. One may therefore assume that *L'Ame en folie* was less influenced by the comments of outsiders than were many of Curel's dramas and also that the final version represents a more coherent whole than the plays into which the author inserted passages long after the first publication.

To the reader familiar with this definitive version the most striking revelation of a study of the manuscripts will be Curel's emphasis on what he considered the *véritable sujet* of his play: Blanche's intellectual awakening. It is quite true that this development of the character of Mme Riolle forms an important part of the action, but in its final form *L'Ame en folie* seems one of the author's most typical *pièces d'idées*, devoted to the exposition of the theory of *la bête et l'ange*,[16] in other words, the conflict of our animal instincts with our soul, which enables us, unlike the beasts, to distinguish right from wrong. The explanation of this seeming inconsistency in the history of the play is probably that, although Curel fully intended to make Blanche the center of his drama, he was soon carried away by his passionate interest in Darwinian theories, which finally assume greater importance than the very slight plot.

A gradual awakening of Curel's interest in these ideas is apparent throughout his complete works. It is especially significant to remark that in his very first literary attempt—the novel *L'Eté des fruits secs*—he wrote: "Eh! mon cher, quelqu'un qui n'aurait étudié l'humanité que par analogie avec l'histoire des bêtes n'aurait pas pour cela mauvaise idée de son espèce ..."[17] Although this quotation shows an early interest in the subject, it was apparently not until Curel's long retirement that he seriously thought of developing his ideas in a play. We find the first hint of his renewed interest in a passage from *La Danse devant le miroir*, written, as we have seen, not long before *L'Ame en folie* was first conceived. The hero of *La Danse*, surprised by the woman he idealizes while he is entertaining a *fille de joie*, attempts to justify himself in the following words:

> Vous n'avez pas appris que l'amour, après nous avoir emportés dans le ciel, glorieux et purs comme des anges, nous précipite soudain sur le sol, changés en fauves exaspérés, et que, dans ce délire où l'animal succède au dieu, nous trouvons une âpre et triste volupté à traîner dans la fange le dieu qui n'a pu rester maître de nous ... .[18]

[16] This expression was first applied to Curel's theories by Lucien Delille, in an article entitled "La Bête et l'ange d'après M. François de Curel" (*Etudes*, CLXIII [April 5, 1920], 85–92).

[17] (Paris: Ollendorff, 1885), p. 60.

[18] *Théâtre complet*, I, 107.

This passage, allowing for differences in character, might well have been spoken by Justin Riolle, who in much the same way defends his niece's surrender to Michel.

Evidence of Curel's preoccupation with this subject is not only to be found in all the plays which followed *L'Ame en folie* (*L'Ivresse du sage, Terre inhumaine, La Viveuse et le moribond,* and *Orage mystique*), but also occasionally is reflected in the revised versions of older works. It must be remembered that the gradual composition of *L'Ame en folie* covered a long period by no means devoted exclusively to this one play. Thus we know that between 1914 and 1919 Curel not only composed *La Comédie du génie* and *L'Ivresse du sage* (performed in 1921 and 1922, respectively) but also prepared revised versions of *Le Coup d'aile, La Figurante, La Fille sauvage, Le Repas du lion,* and *L'Envers d'une sainte.* The subject matter of the plays he chose to rework did not lend itself to digressions on *la bête et l'ange,* except in the case of *La Fille sauvage,* where Curel seized the opportunity to suggest his favorite theory in several new passages which actually contribute much to the understanding of this difficult and obscure drama.[19] Therefore, when we realize how great was Curel's interest in these ideas, it is not difficult to comprehend how they gradually overshadowed his original conception of *L'Ame en folie.*

Such other differences as one may notice between the manuscripts and the final version of the play are all more or less closely connected with this gradual change of emphasis. For example, Curel soon disposes of the somewhat trite motive for the quarrel between Rosa and Michel and invents a situation which serves as a striking example of Justin's ideas. Rosa is now the mistress of an ugly and deformed man whom she loves for his brilliant mind, but at the same time she feels a purely sensual attraction for Michel (whose surname is now Fleutet and who has become a playwright instead of a diplomat). She flees to the country to escape his attentions but leaves her address; and when he follows her she yields, encouraged by the cynical Justin, who is charmed to see physical attractions win over those of the intellect. Thus ought natural selection to operate in the case of human beings, according to Justin, who feels that the old doctrine of the survival of the fittest should apply more frequently at the present time. Never-

[19] See "La Fille sauvage" in *Théâtre complet,* IV, 320, 322, 326, 333–34. These passages are not found in earlier versions of the play.

theless, Curel, with his usual impartiality, also shows us the case of Blanche, whose better nature, unlike that of Rosa, triumphs over her primitive impulses.

In the same manner the last scene is considerably developed in order to bring out the same ideas. Now Blanche no longer listens to a conversation between the skeleton and the mannequin but instead talks herself with the former object of her superstitious fear. In a superb dialogue which, cleverly contrived, simply externalizes Blanche's own thoughts by putting in the mouth of her ghostly interlocutor the doctrines and even the phrases that Blanche has heard throughout the last day of her life Curel sums up his ideas; but he nevertheless concludes on an equivocal note. Blanche has been attempting to find in an encyclopedia information on Messalina, of whom in her ignorance she had never before heard. When she is found dead, her finger still points to the name of the notorious empress. This dénouement confused certain critics, who supposed it to mean that Blanche had died a prey to perverse visions;[20] but, since this is obviously untrue according to the preceding dialogue, we may conclude that Curel was simply attempting a rather cynical ending to a skeptical play, which proposes many questions without offering a final answer to any of them.

It is amusing to recall parenthetically that other misconceptions had a considerable influence upon the career of *L'Ame en folie*. Produced at the Théâtre des arts on December 23, 1919, by the Société coopérative des auteurs dramatiques français, it was received with enthusiasm by a large majority of the critics[21] and ran for about 130 per-

[20] *Ibid.*, V, 222.

[21] The following critics reviewed the play at the time of the first production: on December 24, Adolphe Aderer in *Le petit Parisien*, André Antoine in *L'Information*, Robert de Beauplan in *La Liberté*, Colette in *Le Matin*, Lucien Descaves in *L'Intransigeant*, Fernand Gregh in *Comoedia*, Fernand Nozière in *L'Avenir*, Georges de Pawlowski in *Le Journal*, André Rivoire in *L'Echo de Paris*, and Pierre Wolff in *Le Gaulois;* on December 28, J. Duval in *La Démocratie nouvelle* and Robert de Flers in *Le Figaro;* on December 29, Adolphe Brisson in *Le Temps;* on January 4, 1920, Jean Thouvenin (Adolphe Brisson) in *Annales politiques et littéraires* (No. 1906, pp. 4–5); on January 5, Henry Bidou in *Le Journal des débats;* on January 15, Maurice Allem in *La Minerve française*, Maurice Boissard (Paul Léautaud) in *Mercure de France* (CXXXVII, 482–84), and René Doumic in the *Revue des deux mondes* (LV, 445–50); on January 24, François Mauriac in the *Revue hebdomadaire* (XXIX, No. 4, 543–46), and Gaston Rageot in the *Revue bleue* (LVIII, No. 2, 61–63); on February 1, Léo Claretie in the *Revue mondiale* (CXXXIV, 347–49); on February 7, Henry Bordeaux in the *Revue hebdomadaire* (XXIX, No. 6, 93–99); on March 1, Léo Claretie in the *Larousse mensuel illustré* (V, 58–59); and on April 5, Lucien Delille in *Etudes* (CLXIII, 85–92). Upon the revival of *L'Ame en folie*, February 1, 1922, at the Théâtre du gymnase, the play again received the attention of several critics: on January 1, a preliminary article by Jean Héritier appeared in the *Revue du monde nouveau;* on February 15, Robert de

formances. It could well have prolonged its run, had not the other authors belonging to the Coopérative become impatient to have their own works produced.[22] That the play should have had a greater popular success than any other work of Curel's except *Terre inhumaine* seems surprising, since it is decidedly not the sort of drama which usually appeals to the public. The suggestive title and rumors of daring passages no doubt attracted many listeners who would ordinarily have disdained such a play, but the factor which contributed most to the success of *L'Ame en folie* was perhaps the posters at the theater itself, which, like the invitations to the dress rehearsal, showed a sketch of a skeleton "serrant galamment dans ses bras décharnés une femme nue."[23] Nothing could be more misleading than such posters, for the frankness of *L'Ame en folie* is healthy rather than licentious; but it is not impossible that Curel, who seems to have possessed a sense of humor not always apparent in his plays, accepted philosophically this ironical reason for his sudden popularity with the public.

The evolution of *L'Ame en folie*, with the gradual shift in emphasis which we have remarked, led finally to a magnificent *pièce d'idées* which, unfortunately, in common with other plays of this genre, lacks the theatrical element so essential to a lasting popular success. It remained for Curel to combine this element with a similar exposition of ideas in *Terre inhumaine*, which may be looked upon as the author's dramatic masterpiece from a technical point of view. What, then, is the importance of *L'Ame en folie* in Curel's theater? It lies in the fact that the play is rich in scientific and philosophical ideas (the author's great contribution to the French theater) and furthermore marks the summit of Curel's art, combining in a single drama the best qualities of his previous works. Thus we find psychological analysis of characters who never become abstractions in spite of representing theories; a symbolism which is an integral part of the play rather than an artificial device; and, finally, an admirably clear and vigorous style. In spite of technical faults, *L'Ame en folie* is one of the best plays that Curel ever wrote, and the characters remain among the most vivid that he has created.

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Flers reviewed the work in *Le Figaro;* and, finally, on February 19, Jean Ravennes considered the play in the *Revue française* (XVII, No. 8, 213–14).

[22] *Théâtre complet*, V, 232.

[23] René Doumic, "L'Ame en folie," *Revue des deux mondes*, January 15, 1920, p. 446.